

Brief report on the project 'Social Capital and Social Networks', part of the ESRC Programme on Democracy and Participation, with M Savage, B Longhurst & M Tomlinson, K Ray & G Tampubolon

Background

The project was designed to contribute to debates about the distribution of social capital in Britain and its effects on civic and political participation. In particular it addressed questions about activism and the characteristics of activists.

A multi-method design involved secondary analysis of panel data (from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), waves 1991-98), collection and analysis of social network information of three organizations, and life history interviews with a selection of organizational members. Particularly distinctive methodologically was its application of social network analysis, an approach much neglected in the UK. Theoretically, we sought to develop an analysis of political activism that challenges both individualistic interpretations of activism (such as that derived from rational choice theory) and purely institutionalist accounts of activism, by stressing the contextual nature of activism.

Methods

The research was conducted in three distinct and complementary phases.

First, we used the BHPS to examine memberships of voluntary associations, exploring fluctuation and turnover in the membership of associations, the relationship between political identification and associational membership, and the relationship between friendship and associational membership.

Second, we carried out detailed case studies of the social networks of three organisations in the Manchester area, a branch of the Labour Party, a local conservation group, and a branch of an environmental group. We administered two survey instruments, the first comparatively brief and simple which was conducted by post, the second collected more complex network information in a face-to-face interview. These produced information on inter-personal connections, organizational affiliations, political identifications and socio-demographic characteristics of about 300 members.

Third, we conducted 30 life history interviews, with 10 volunteers from each of the three case study organisations. In these we solicited personal narratives about the purposes, commitments, and contingent preconditions, including personal connections, for varying levels of activism in different organizations over the course of a person's life.

Results

BHPS data showed that the aggregate number of memberships remained roughly constant during the 1990s, suggesting no decline of social capital in Britain. However, there was growing social class polarisation of membership, with professionals and managers having increasing numbers of memberships, while among other classes participation has not increased. Striking was a very high turnover of memberships during the 1990s. Individuals readily join and leave associations, with only a small proportion retaining particular memberships over a measured five year period. The extent of churning has been much underestimated previously. As before, panel studies demonstrate the concurrence of aggregate stability and considerable degrees of fluctuation of behaviour or condition for individuals. Thus, for example, in any one year 45% of Britons have no memberships, but over a five year period only 15 per cent never have one. This suggests that most people exhibit sporadic commitment to particular organizations of causes, though contrary to common wisdom such movement may be positive both for organizational renewal and for the building of social contacts and connections. In addition it suggests that a significant proportion of the currently inactive population is potentially available to be mobilised if issues or circumstances should arise.

Amidst the fluctuating memberships, organizations nevertheless do, and must, recruit some individuals sufficiently stable and committed to conduct their routine and strategic business. Network methods identify core members, those who have most interpersonal connections with others in the organization, and who in fact do most of the work. However, they prove not significantly different in their attributes from other members who are peripheral and take little part in activities. While class, education, age, income and gender are important in predicting who will become members, they make little difference in explaining either how individuals will act or how much they will be active. The idea that some individuals are 'activist types' receives no confirmation. Life history testimonies corroborate this, indicating that most members have been active in a variety of organisations, and do not focus their activism on one 'cause'. The way they talk about their involvement suggests that those currently in core roles do not see themselves as especially distinctive, largely because they recognise in their own careers and experience that the transformation from passive member to active participant is often highly contingent.

The networks of connections in the three case study groups are very different, reflecting the different organizational structure, level of hierarchy, and their strategic purpose. Nevertheless in none of them are the active, core members insulated, disconnected from the wider population. Activists are heavily involved in other groups, they have wide ranging social networks, they do not form exclusive activist cliques in organisations, and they come into contact with many other people in other associations. Nevertheless civic associations, including political parties and social movement organizations, recruit and retain similar categories of person, broadly defined middle class. This implies the existence of a relatively socially unified political and civic field across which some people

traverse different organisations according to their strategic, social or emotional inclinations. Theoretically, our findings suggest the existence of a political field which is becoming more isomorphic and exclusive. As activists move between organisations, so the skills and dispositions required to be organisational members and activists become more generic. It is likely that this process is self-perpetuating.

Our project indicates the great explanatory benefit of combining data of different types, in this case the interpretation of unique and powerful network information being much aided by situating it in context of national-level panel data and accounts of the experiences and understandings of individuals through narrative life histories.